

Mongrels, Mutts, and Rescued Dogs

At a United Methodist church that shall remain nameless, Pastor George is sitting in his study one day when the church's administrative assistant, Judy, sticks her head in the door. Judy says, "Pastor, Mrs. Smith is on the phone, and she's extremely upset. Her beloved dog, Shep, has passed away. And she wants to know if you would conduct a funeral service for him."

Well. Pastor George is incensed. He gets all red in the face, and he says, with more than a little indignation, "You get back on that phone and you tell that woman that I do NOT do funerals for DOGS! I am a minister of the gospel, with a master of divinity degree. For thirty years, I've served this annual conference as an elder in full connection. I perform funerals for church members ONLY."

So Judy goes back and speaks to Mrs. Smith on the phone. And she then she returns to Pastor George's study. He demands, "Did you tell her?" Judy reports, "I did. Mrs. Smith said that's too bad. She's calling every other church in town, too, because if she can find a pastor willing to officiate at a funeral service for

her dear departed companion, she's willing to give that church ten thousand dollars.”

And Pastor George exclaims, “I didn't know old Shep was a Methodist!”

Okay. I admit it. Pastor George and Judy are fictional. So are Mrs. Smith and her dog Shep. But if you share your home with a dog, if you have ever been owned by one or more dogs—and many of you have—you know that they have a way of laying claim to your heart. On one TV commercial, a woman appearing with her dog confides: “We love him like family, so we feed him like family.”

Dogs do all kinds of things for us and with us. They take us for walks and runs and keep us active. They go on vacation with us. At home, they announce visitors. And they protect our families—sometimes with their lives. If we're unable to see or move around, they guide and help. They serve in police departments, in the military, and as therapy dogs in hospitals and nursing facilities. Did you know that you can reduce your blood pressure just by stroking a dog? Dogs offer unconditional love. Their deepest desire is to have a forever home. To belong to a family.

And they ask for nothing more than to be near their dear ones.

Like Bob's and my granddogs, Charcoal and Izzie. They like to hang out under the kitchen table, because they know that sooner or later, the kiddos are going to drop—or throw!—some tidbits on the floor for them to enjoy. When we come together for a meal, dogs like to gather around the table with us.

At least, that's how it is in many households in our contemporary Western society. In some other cultures, the status of dogs is far lower. In one Near-Eastern country, it's illegal to buy or sell or even own a dog. Some people do it anyway. But if a dog is seen in a public place or in a car, the owner may be fined or have his driver's license suspended. And the car and/or dog may be confiscated.

In biblical times, it would have been unusual for a family of Jews to keep even a small dog as a pet. Most dogs were roaming scavengers and, therefore, thought to be unclean. The people of ancient Israel consider another group to be unclean, too—those outside the community of faith. Those who don't keep the law of Moses. Non-Jews. Gentiles. So in Jesus' day, it's not uncommon

for Jews to associate Gentiles with dogs and to refer to them as dogs. And not in a complimentary way!

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples have withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon, on the Mediterranean coast. They're in Gentile country. Matthew doesn't tell us why they've traveled there. It may have been for a time of rest and renewal. But, as so often happens, their time away is interrupted. And by a woman, no less! A Canaanite woman. A Gentile woman. An unescorted woman. A woman who actually dares to speak to a man in public. And not only speaking—screaming and shouting. Pleading for mercy. For the healing of her daughter.

Well. The twelve are incredulous. And more than a little annoyed. *Get rid of her, Jesus. The daughter's possessed by a demon, so the mother must have a sinful past. And besides that, she's crazy! Get this noisy woman—this outsider—outta here.*

And what does Jesus do? First, he ignores her cries. Then he says he can't help her because he's been sent only to the people of Israel. And she's not one of them—she's not a Jew. Finally, he insinuates that she is a Gentile dog.

Wow. That kind of leaves us scratching our heads and looking at each other, doesn't it? The way Jesus responds to this woman puzzles us. Befuddles us. Because this just doesn't sound like the Jesus we're sure we know. This account of Jesus and a desperate woman isn't easy for us to hear or to comprehend.

But when we read Matthew's Gospel in its entirety, it becomes clear that up to this point, the mission of Jesus—himself a Jew—has been limited to his own people. Yet, after this encounter with a Canaanite woman, Jesus ministers to anyone and everyone who crosses his path. Even outsiders! *Especially* outsiders.

My sisters and brothers, where are *our* outsiders?

Quite a few of us make reading *The Upper Room* part of our day. Many of the devotional meditations in *The Upper Room* are written by people from nations around the globe. If we passed these men and women on the street—not knowing that they're people of faith—would we regard them only as foreigners? As outsiders?

Who are outsiders to us? Who are outsiders *for* us? The ones who look different and sound different and dress different

and act different from us? The ones who don't worship the way we do? How do we feel about them? How do we treat them? Does there lurk within our heart of hearts an inclination to exclude? An inclination, even, to think of them as dogs, just as Gentiles were thought of by some first-century Jews? By the chosen people. By *God's* people, who thought of the "other" as somehow more distant from God.

From the One who gives them—and gives us—the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament. Which tells us that God's ways are higher than our ways, and that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Maybe that's why we always have more questions than answers.

Is it possible that through Jesus' dialogue with this Gentile woman, he gains a broader perspective on his purpose? A new understanding of his mission? The story of Jonah reminds us that God can and does change God's mind. And Jesus, with the mind of God, can surely change *his* mind as well.

With the apostle Paul, we pray that this radically inclusive mind of Christ will be in us. You and I are called to follow the example of this One whose mind moves him to care for the "other." You and I are called to follow the example of this One

whose love includes and reaches out to the outsider, to the alien, to the vulnerable human creature that some might disparage as a dog.

Like this nameless Canaanite who comes to Jesus for relief of her daughter's suffering. We who have watched our own children and grandchildren struggle with illness know something of what she's feeling. But even in her desperation, this woman has much to teach us.

This Canaanite woman knows who Jesus is and what Jesus can do. Even before she approaches him. This Canaanite woman confesses Jesus as her Lord. This Canaanite woman falls at the feet of Jesus—acknowledging her own unworthiness and her complete dependence on his amazing power to heal. This Canaanite woman believes that Jesus and only Jesus can help her—that without him she is utterly without hope. This Canaanite woman never gives up. This Canaanite woman keeps on asking, keeps on seeking, keeps on knocking. Because this Canaanite woman's faith is great!

From her, we learn something about how to pray. In trust. In humility. In total dependence. In relationship. And in confident persistence born of unshakable belief. The faith of this

Canaanite woman is praised by Jesus. The faith of this Canaanite woman inspires you and me.

And her story invites us into it. Her story invites us to reflect: Who is the outsider? Is it this woman? A Gentile? A dog?

Or could it be you and me? Like her, we are Gentiles. Unlike her, we may have been thinking of ourselves as insiders. Her story helps us understand who we are *not*. We are not the insiders. We are not God's firstborn children.

Her story also helps us understand who we *are*. We are the ones she's talking about when she says to Jesus: *Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table*. No one is excluded. Each one is a part of God's perfect plan to rescue, to deliver, to save. For as Paul affirms, God's mercy is for all people. Everywhere. And Jesus Christ calls us to include others even as we have been included.

Because we are the adopted ones. We are the mutts. We are the Heinz fifty-sevens. We are the pound puppies. We are the rescued ones.

Who come together to have our spirits fed. We gather in anticipation. We rejoice and we delight in all that falls from the hand of a generous Master. We receive unfailing mercy. We

receive measureless grace. We receive unconditional love. We receive our deepest desire: a forever home. For all of us dogs now belong to a family. One family. The family of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.